

Claiming Space: Our Right to the City

by Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson

Editor's note: With this issue of La Voz, we are initiating a forum looking at the concepts of space, commodification, and power relations within cities and how these concepts are interrelated and can ultimately lead to the erasure of whole communities and cultures.

The construction of the city—that is, the purposeful placement of neighborhoods, school districts, streets, highways, parks, plazas, business districts, sites of tourism, military bases—is never a “neutral” or merely accidental process. The topography of the city reveals more than just landmarks. It reveals social and power relations and relationships that shape (and are shaped by) the construction of the cityscape. Understanding space as socially and politically produced enables us to spell out how the construction of the city renders individuals and communities literally invisible and voiceless to those in power as well as empowers us to intervene in such anti-democratic abuses of power. Most importantly, it helps us to assume our right to the city, our right to public space.

Cities themselves can be read like books and contain “spatial stories,” or narratives and histories about the spaces of the city. Various geographers have noted how modern cities have developed in an exclusionary way so that the so-called “undesirable” elements of society, such as the poor, the working class, people of color, the disabled, and the homeless are often contained, partitioned off, and ghetto-ized to the benefit of those in power, namely the middle and upper classes, which are predominately white. UTSA political scientist Rudy Rosales illustrates this point by noting how taxes in San Antonio have historically been reallocated from poorer areas of the city to supplement development on the



occupied by poor and working class people of color, are cut off from the downtown core, where the major tourist attractions lie, in addition to being kept at a distance from some of the richest neighborhoods in San Antonio, such as Alamo Heights or Terrell Hills, which are only a couple of miles away from any of these marginalized communities. And, in the case of the East and Westside, not only are they severed from other, more affluent parts of the city (a strategic positioning that helped to block poorer communities’ access to important city resources), but also the Mexican culture that is germane to these areas has been co-opted, sanitized for tourist consumption, and profited on at the expense of the Mexican and Mexican American or Chicana/o poor and working class.

To further explore issues of space and inequality within San Antonio and beyond, this forum entitled “Claiming Space: Our Right to the City” will focus on the construction and contestation of space. This forum has been inspired and galvanized by an ordinance voted on by City Council that will effectively put a price on free speech and protest and restrain our access to the streets. If passed, this ordinance will charge already disenfranchised groups exorbitant costs to represent themselves in the public sphere of the street, a space that has historically been a key site in the mobilization of civil rights movements, such as those led by Emma Tenayuca or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

During the next several months leading up to the trial that will decide the constitutionality of this ordinance, we will utilize this interim as an opportunity to feature monthly articles by community members, activists, and/or academics concerning the production of space in order to collectively explore and create diverse conversations around issues of space and the city. Through bringing together various perspectives on space, we hope to highlight and generate possibilities for contesting and transforming spatial relations. Over the next several months, contributors will explore spaces of San Antonio and cities with similar demographics and will pay close attention to the presence of asymmetrical power relations embedded in these spaces as well as focusing on how to re-appropriate power to enact more egalitarian cityscapes. Finally, we will investigate multiple ways to reclaim “the right to the city,” the right to occupy public city space, a right that is integral to a truly democratic society.

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MLK March, 2008. Photo Credit: Esperanza archives

more affluent and Anglo Northside. The space of the city, then, is something that is actively shaped and maintained by human agents with particular interests, stakes, and investments.

Particular spatial arrangements, in addition, often help to preserve existing power relations. While the East, South, and Westside are rich in *cultura* and *historia*, their specific locations creates a *de facto* or an informal type of class, ethnic, and racial segregation. The East, South, and Westside, all neighborhoods

Market Value or Democratic Value

by Nathan Clough

“Why should I have to pay for some whacko to block traffic?” The preceding question is commonly posed by those who support the city of San Antonio’s decision to charge parade organizers, protesters, and other users of the city’s public streets for costs incurred while policing those events. Indeed, the logic of this argument is easily understood; we live in a world where everything, it seems, comes with a price attached to it. In our everyday lives we must live by a budget, squeezed by rising gas prices, our neighbors struggling to pay their mortgages, we seek out the best bargains and we discipline ourselves through the painstaking balancing of our checkbooks. We are well aware that there is no free lunch. It is seemingly natural, then, that we should sympathize with the city, which is equally subject to a budget as we are. We can imagine the horror of being unable to predict our expenses from month to month and year to year and we see the municipality in this position due to the arbitrary whims of people who impose costs through irresponsibly and insensitively organizing protests at which the peace must be kept, police officers must be paid overtime, streets must be rerouted, clean-up crews must be brought in to return the streets to usable condition, uncluttered with the detritus of festival or dissent. And who pays for all of this? Surely, not those who marched and paraded? No, the tax-payers; that most virtuous category of citizen whose largesse allows the wheels of society to turn. What could be more natural, more neutral, and more just than for those who create the costs to pay the price? Isn’t this the way the world works? Why should the rest of us be burdened by the eccentricities of a few who insist on walking down the middle of the street carrying signs? One word: *Democracy*. The parade ordinance is built on an economic logic that is at odds with democracy in which public space is treated by the government as a commodity to be bought and sold rather than as a public trust that is essential to democratic practice. When this economic logic is utilized in deciding who gets to use public space and who does not the result is to undermine the very possibility of a democratic society.

Democracy rests on the assumption that a society of free individuals can gather to rationally argue their common fate as equals. This system cannot work without the people having equal power to argue and to influence, regardless of their means or position, in a deliberation that is public and transparent. If those



An indigenous procession for La Virgen de Guadalupe.

occurs in what is called the “public sphere,” it is a place where unequal power relations are set aside and people engage as peers.

Now, in reality we know that no such place actually exists. The forum for free and rational discussion between equals might be the media, but we know that the newspapers, and the television stations are all run for a profit by people with very strong interests which are reflected in what they publish and broadcast. It is not in the elections we are currently watching when running a campaign for office requires huge sums of money and the consent of the ruling elite in the form of the Democratic and Republican parties. This then implies that voting for a restricted slate of the already powerful is an impoverished version of democracy, those of us who are not rich and powerful do not engage in the debates that we watch on television, we are allowed merely to choose between those options presented to us. But what if we have ideas that the media and the candidates do not address? What if we know important things that are not covered on television or in the newspapers? Where can we go to get our ideas out if not to the media or the government? We go to the streets.

We go to the streets because they are public spaces and public space is the closest thing we have to a real public sphere. These streets, these spaces, are public not because they are owned by the government. Rather, they are public because they belong to the people, and this is where the logic of paying for use of the streets falls apart. Those who protest have already paid for these spaces, protestors are tax-payers too. Further, public space is not a commodity, it plays a more important role,



From the Greek acropolis, to the Mexican zocalo, to the New England town square,

who were rich or held hereditary power (as in the feudal systems of the pre-democratic era) had more say, or if their opinions carried more weight than those of the rest then the system could not be said to be a true democracy because the opinions and interests of the weak would be structurally less likely to be taken up than those of the powerful. This deliberation between equals

it is subject to a different logic. The streets and other public spaces are traditional public forums where for time out of mind the people have gathered to debate, to argue, and to air their grievances to their peers and rulers. From the Greek acropolis, to the Mexican zocalo, to the New England town square, public space is for the people to engage each other as members of the

No Free Speech: Another Symptom of Corporate Domination of Our Lives

by Frank (Pancho) Valdez

Several weeks ago I attended a meeting of the **San Antonio Free Speech Coalition** at the **Esperanza Peace & Justice Center**. I volunteered to submit an article on the issue of free speech and began churning one out only to somehow lose it on the computer. While this loss was an inconvenience, the new article will perhaps be more appropriate as it is inclusive of more than just the issue of free speech.

On Saturday, February 9th, I rented the film *Border Town* starring Jennifer Lopez, Antonio Banderas, Sonia Braga, Martin Sheen and Maya Zapata. To my surprise the movie told a story about the plight of women maquiladora workers in Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. The story of these victims of brutal murder and rape has become an issue not only on the U.S. – Mexican border, but across the world as well.

Border Town not only sheds light on the murders it also exposes the collusion of the governments of the U.S. and Mexico with the corporations that own and operate the maquiladoras. It exposes the low wages paid to the maquiladora workers (\$5.00 per day), the horrific working conditions inside the factories, the unsanitary, unsafe housing that is forced on these workers as well as the gross injustices imposed on these women workers under the **North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)**.

Whether in Mexico or in the U.S. people must be allowed to express their opposition to such injustices. Our right to free speech is rapidly becoming lost as corporate America pressures

government officials and news media alike to put as many obstacles in front of us as possible. A truly free press is vital for truth to be disseminated. The adverse effects of **NAFTA** are not at the top of the list for most newspapers or electronic media. Free speech is never free when one opposes the exploitation and injustices of the powerful corporate interests!

Locally, the *International Women's Day March* faces restrictions as the San Antonio City Council has imposed blatantly unconstitutional regulations as to who can and who cannot use public streets to express themselves. Attempting to bring attention to issues such as the murders of women on the border and the complicity of U.S. corporations will be limited unless we organize and **RESIST!**

It is imperative that we show our solidarity with the murdered women and those exploited in the maquiladoras. These women were someone's daughters, someone's mothers, someone's wives. Their struggle is **OUR** struggle! We must have a good turn out of marchers on March 8th. We must also show our opposition to the repressive

City ordinance that would limit our free speech rights! We must never forget the words of the great Chicana labor activist Emma Tenayuca; **We are not a conquered people!**

Bio: Frank Valdez is a local social justice activist with more than 40 years in the civil rights, labor and peace movements. At present he is co-chair for the San Antonio Healthcare-Now Coalition.



The Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras in S.A.



polity. These are the places where those who do not have any say in what the media and government argue about gather to force, yes force, those who are used to telling the people what to care about to listen to us, if only briefly. Public space is the only place in our entire society where we have both the ability and the right to speak truth to power. The plan to charge us for that right would reduce democracy to a market transaction and would diminish public space from a public sphere to a mere commodity.

The City Council apparently does not understand the difference between selling the spaces of the city to those who can pay and holding public space in the public trust as a democratic forum. If the City Council believed in democracy then it would not discriminate against the voices of the poor, but this is the

groups to use the streets without charge due to the supposed benefit to all that these uses produce the city betrays its contempt for the voices of those who engage in speech that is critical rather than celebratory. The city attempts to co-opt what were formerly defiant marches against power and to recreate them as tourist spectacles. Those parades that are excepted from the ordinance are those that portray the city of San Antonio as a place to visit, as a place to spend money, as a place with no need for people to take to the streets. However, what we are left with is a city in which it is illegal for the poor and those whose views diverge from those of power to speak where they might be heard. In essence, the city is attempting to regulate people and politics through the regulation of public space via market mechanisms, not democratic values.

public space is for the people to engage each other as members of the polity.



very thing it proposes to do. Charging people to march doubly discriminates against those who are already excluded from most of public life. Anyone who can afford to pay the city the fees it requests is likely to be able to buy their way into formal politics, but public space should be available especially for those who cannot afford such participation. Further, by allowing certain

By subjecting public space to an economic logic the city distorts democracy by giving the rich and the uncontroversial space while the rest are left, literally, with no place in the system.

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